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Dal Cairo a Roma. Visual Arts and Transcultural Interactions between Egypt and Italy

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Abstract: Cross-cultural interactions between Egypt and Italy have had a significant impact on Egyptian modern art. By the end of the nineteenth century many Italian painters had established their studios in Cairo and Alexandria and worked as professors in art schools. They were committed to the institutionalization of the artistic practice, in particular, in the conception of the School of Fine Arts in Cairo established by Prince Youssef Kamal in 1908. Additionally, a number of young Egyptians belonging to the generation of the so-called "pioneers" received grants to study art in Italy, in particular in Rome and Florence. These ties were strengthened by the political climate and the diplomatic relationships between the Egyptian monarchy and the Italian government. This article proposes to examine the impact on visual culture created by the mobility of artists and circulation of images between Egypt and Italy. In this context, it aims to shed light on transnational exchanges and networks generated by spaces of cultural encounters or "contact zones" during the first quarter of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Egypt and Italy, Egyptian Modernism, Transcultural exchange, Art Salons, Futurism

Introduction

Since Antiquity, the Mediterranean Basin has been a space of cross-cultural encounters where diverse populations increasingly intermingled through commerce and exchange up to the rise of the Roman and Byzantine Empires. By the fifteenth century, when the Ottoman Empire was expanding, multiple commercial trade routes connecting the Christian and Muslim worlds were established. In this context, the circulation of artists, artworks and artefacts

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at the crossroads of Venice and the Sublime Porte had major consequences for visual culture.[1]

These commercial and cultural interactions were intensified throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the migration of European populations to the Middle East. Egypt was the chosen place for many Italian citizens, who had left their country for economical reasons and came to Cairo or to the port of Alexandria, characterized by their cosmopolitanism,[2] in search of new opportunities. The country was indeed a space where a plurality of European and Middle Eastern populations coexisted, including Italians but also Greeks, French, British, Levantines and Armenians. The presence of these communities left major imprints on Egyptian social and cultural life, notably on the establishment of schools and religious institutions, as well as on a thriving plurilingual printed press. Perhaps one of the most tangible legacies of these migratory flows in the public space resides in the architectural design and urban planning of Cairo and Alexandria.[3] While a number of significant researches have shed light on the role played by Italian architects and construction engineers in reshaping Egyptian cityscapes at the turn of the twentieth century,[4] many aspects of the role played by these communities in the domain of art and art education yet deserve to be uncovered.

Several pioneering studies of modern Arab art have brought to the fore the importance of transnational exchanges between Europe and the Middle East in the development of visual arts in the region.[5] More recently, a number of exhibitions have focused on the cultural dialogue between Italy and the Middle East, opening the path to an ongoing reflection on the creative aspects of these networks of exchange.[6]

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1 Regarding the impact of cultural interactions between Venice and the Middle East on artworks and artefacts, see the catalogue of the exhibition *Venise et l'Orient* held at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, Carboni 2006. The exhibition was also shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York under the title *Venice and the Islamic World 828–1797*, Carboni 2007.

2 The multicultural aspects of the city of Alexandria are discussed by: Ilbert/Yannanakis 1992; Ilbert 1996.

3 Significant studies have been published about the impact of transnational circulation of European and Egyptian architects on modern architecture and urban planning in Egypt. See Volait 2001; Volait 2005: ch. 4–5.

4 On Italian architects and engineers working in Egypt during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Godoli/Milva (eds.) 2008; Volait 1987.

5 The question of modernity in Arab Art has been addressed in the pioneering researches of Silvia Naef and Nada Shabout. Naef 1996; Shabout 2007. Recently, several Ph.D. dissertations have focused specifically on the case of modern Egyptian art. Correa 2014; Davies 2014; Radwan 2013a.

6 Bardaouil/Fellrath 2008; Corgnati/Barakat 2008; Corgnati 2010; Giudice/Rigel Langella 2004.

This article proposes to further explore the impact of this dialogue on the development of early modern Egyptian art. It focuses on the notions of circulations and mobility to address visual knowledge transfer and cultural practices.[7] Indeed, the fluid circulation of artists and images between Egypt and Italy led to the reconfiguration of spaces of cultural encounter or "contact zones", to use the term coined by Marie Louise Pratt.[8] While Pratt defines "contact zones" as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power",[9] this contribution aims at underlining the connective and creative aspects of transculturation in "contact zones" when it comes to Egyptian modern art history. Indeed, in that context, it appears that in spaces of cultural encounter and exchange, such as artistic groups and informal art spaces, power relations were not as much at stake as the opportunity to build up and consolidate international networks. It is therefore mainly the connectivity of "contact zones" that will be addressed in this article.

In this context, it explores three main aspects of cultural interactions across the Mediterranean and their impact on Egyptian visual culture at the beginning of the twentieth century. First, it examines the circulation of artists and images coming from Egypt to Italy, by underlining the presence of Italian professors and their commitment to the domain of art education and cultural institutions. Second, it addresses the mobility of young Egyptian artists, who were sent to Italy with governmental grants and the consequences of these scholar missions on the redefinition and relocation of their artistic practice. Finally, it considers the influence of the diplomatic connection between the two countries, in particular by investigating the underlying political aspects of the establishment of the Egyptian Academy in Rome, as well as Egypt's representation on the international art scene by its first participation in the Venice Biennale.

Although this article concentrates on Egypt's multiple connections with Italy as an exemplary case study, one has to bear in mind that similar processes were repeated during that period with other European countries,

7 The importance of the study of "circulations" as an approach to transnational art history has been brought to the fore by DaCosta Kaufmann/Dossin/Joyeux-Prunel 2015. In the context of modern cultural practices in the Middle East, this notion has recently been addressed at a panel entitled "Visual Knowledge in Motion: Reframing the Creation of Cultural Practices in the Modern Middle East, Turkey and Iran" organized by Nadia Radwan and Melania Savino. This panel was held at the Middle East Study Association (MESA) Annual Meeting, Washington DC, 25 November 2014.

8 Pratt 1991 : 33–40.

9 Pratt 1991: 34.

such as France or Great Britain. Indeed, similar circulation movements were noteworthy whether within national boundaries – between Lower and Upper Egypt – or transregional – between Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries.

As a brief preamble to the issue of artistic connexions between Egypt and Italy, it seems relevant to recall the circumstances of one of the first art exhibitions to be held in Cairo. This emblematical event, which generally marks the beginning of the history of Egyptian modern art, was sponsored by Onofrio Abbate Pasha (1824–1915), a prominent doctor from Palermo, who came to Egypt in 1845 to serve as chief medical officer of the khedivial army. Abbate Pasha became president of the Khedivial Society of Geography in 1894 and received the Imperial Order of the Medjidié[10] for his services to the khedivial family. Besides his activities as a doctor, Abbate Pasha's interests ranged from botany, geography and archaeology[11] to art and poetry. As an art lover, he founded a society named the *Cercle Artistique*, which published a weekly review called *L'Arte*.[12] This society regularly organized Art Salons[13] inspired by the model of the Parisian *Salon*, which were held in the villa of a French businessman and art collector, Baron Alphonse Delort de Gléon (1843–1899).[14] Such gatherings brought together a diversity of dilettantes, intellectuals, writers, and artists, who met regularly to discuss and debate art, literature and politics. Following the initiative of an orientalist artist of Greek origin named Theodore Ralli,[15] Abbate Pasha and the members of the *Cercle Artistique* decided to organize a large-scale art exhibition in the Khedivial Opera House in Cairo. This grand event, which was a premiere of its kind, attracted a wide public, including members of the khedivial family, British officials and personalities of the Cairene elite. The participants were mainly European orientalist artists passing through Cairo, amongst them several students of the French orientalist painter Jean-Léon Gérôme.

10 The Order of Medjidié is a knightly order established by Sultan Abdülmecid I that recognizes outstanding services to the Ottoman Empire.

11 Onofrio Abbate is the author of several scientific works on Egypt. Abbate 1843; Abbate 1898.

12 The contributors of the review *L'Arte* included the Italian musician Gustavo Cenci and the Nabi painter Emile Bernard. See Volait 2013: 24–27.

13 The phenomenon of the Art Salon in the Middle East has recently been addressed in a panel entitled "The Art Salon in the Middle East: Migration of Institutional Patronage and its Challenges" organized by Monique Bellan, Nadia Radwan and Nadia von Maltzahn, held at the XIII Conference of the Italian Society for Middle Eastern Studies in Catania, 19 March 2016.

14 For further information about the activities of Delort de Gléon in Egypt, see Volait 2009: 99–104.

15 Theodoros Scaramanga Rallis (1852–1909), also known as Théodore Jacques Ralli, was a student of Jean-Léon Gérôme and became a leading figure of the Greek Orientalist School. Maria Katsanaki has shed light on the life and work of this artist in her Ph.D. dissertation: Katsanaki 2007.

The exhibition was inaugurated in February 1891 in the Opera House by Khedive Tawfiq, who was in the last year of his reign.[16] Hence, in addition to being patronized by an important Italian figure, the chosen space to host this cultural event was representative of Italian culture. The Opera House had been designed a few decades earlier by Pietro Avoscani, an Italian architect commissioned by Khedive Ismail to participate in the ambitious architectural programme implemented for the inauguration of the Suez Canal in 1869. The design of the building was strongly influenced by the typology of the Scala in Milan and had been opened to the public with a performance of *Rigoletto* by Giuseppe Verdi. This reflects the khedivial family's inclination for Italian culture, which would later characterize the taste of the monarchy. King Fuad I was a convinced italophile, as was his son and successor on the throne Farouk I, who acquired a number of Italian paintings to decorate his summer palace in Helwan. Thus benefiting from the European-oriented artistic taste of the ruling powers, a large number of Italians had established their studios in Cairo and Alexandria by the turn of the twentieth century. Some of them, as we shall see in the next chapter, played a significant role as art educators in training a generation of young Egyptian artists, generally referred to as the "pioneers".

Teaching the *Belle Arti* in Cairo

In 1908, the patron and art collector Prince Youssef Kamal (1882–1967), together with the French sculptor Guillaume Laplagne (1870–1927), established the School of Fine Arts in Cairo (*Madrasat al-funun al-jamila*) in a villa located in the neighbourhood of Darb al-Gamamiz.[17] This experimental project preceded the opening of Cairo University by a few months and its endeavour was to train young Egyptians in the field of European fine arts. Accordingly, the administration of the new institution would remain in the hands of French and Italian artists for almost thirty years after its inception.[18] The Italian painter Paolo Forcella,[19] who was appointed as the first director of the drawing and painting section of the School, collaborated closely with Guillaume Laplagne in

16 Khedive Tawfiq's son, Abbas Hilmi II, succeeded him in January 1892 and was the last khedive of Egypt.

17 Radwan 2013a.

18 This was indeed the case until 1937, when the painter and diplomat Mohamed Naghi was the first Egyptian to be appointed head of the School of Fine Arts in Cairo.

19 Because the same year of birth (1868) is usually mentioned for Paolo Forcella and his brother Nicola Forcella, we prefer not to give any date in the absence of a reliable source.

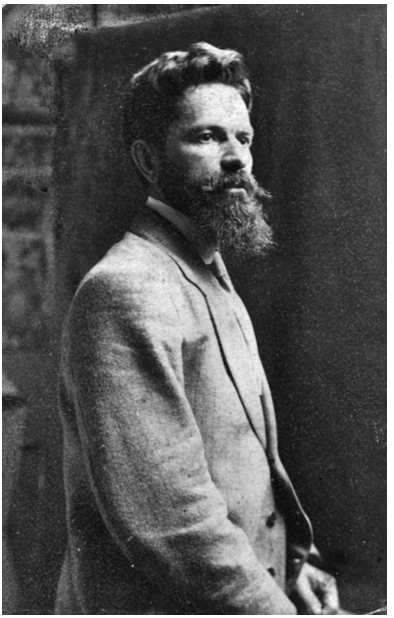

Figure 1: Photograph of Paolo Forcella, c. 1910s. Courtesy: Eimad Abu Ghazi.

conceiving its educational programme (Figure 1). The curriculum, established according to European conventions, included classes in perspective, composition and anatomy, as well as life painting classes.

Paolo Forcella, who was originally from Puglia, had studied the fine arts in Naples and most probably arrived in Cairo towards the end of the nineteenth century, following in the footsteps of his brother Nicola Forcella, who worked as a teacher at the khedivial school of Applied Arts.[20] The Forcella brothers' orientalist paintings were much appreciated by the khedivial family, who enjoyed their picturesque views of medieval Cairo with their mosques and minarets, desert landscapes, portraits of Egyptian women and other popular orientalist subjects, such as the traditional market or the carpet sellers. The presence of an artist such as Paolo Forcella at the head of the drawing and painting section was significant in terms of defining the canons, aesthetics, techniques and mediums that were conveyed to the first generation of students who enrolled in the newly established institution.

In his *Rapporto sulla scuola egiziana di Belle Arti* addressed to King Fuad I in 1911, Paolo Forcella explained that despite the general pessimism regarding the possibility of a successful outcome of founding such a school in Egypt, his students demonstrated great "aptitudes" for the fine arts in general. He further

20 Abaza 2011: 211.

underlined that as in art schools in European countries, only a small percentage of his students had the talent to make a career as artists, and that the rest of them would be destined to work in the field of decorative and applied arts.[21] His expectations would however be largely surpassed as most of his students later became leading figures of their generation. Commonly referred to as the "pioneers" (*al-ruwwad*) because they were among the first to benefit from an institutional training in the field of the fine arts, these artists included the painters Youssef Kamil, Ragheb Ayad, Ahmed Sabry and Mohamed Hassan.[22] Forcella introduced them to easel oil painting and European genres such as landscape, nude and portrait. These genres were defined *de facto* as ways of engaging with modernity and reflected their adherence to "high" culture. Thus, in their early careers, these artists would be profoundly influenced by Forcella's academic programme before they turned towards subjects that would reflect their Egyptian identities.

Italian artists not only played an important part in establishing the aesthetic canons of the institutional art-education system but were also active as artists. They found a clientele among a privileged social class increasingly eager to acquire canvases to decorate their mansions and palaces. The appreciation and possession of European paintings hence not only functioned as a reflection of social status but generally as the sign of belonging to a modern and cultured society. However, while they enjoyed a certain fame and status in Egypt, most of these artists were totally forgotten and ignored by the public when they returned to Italy, failing to find potential buyers for their work. Indeed, the taste of their countrymen did not necessarily accord with the orientalist production that had been much appreciated in Egypt. Many of them were considered as old-fashioned minor artists and encountered serious difficulties in recreating networks in a scene that was already dominated by others when they returned.

This was the case, for instance, with the painter Camillo Innocenti (1871–1961), who, trained at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, was appointed director of the School of Fine Arts in Cairo between 1927 and 1937. Innocenti was close to the artists Domenico Morelli and Antonio Mancini[23] and like them, he painted historical scenes before he lightened his touch and freed his palette, bringing him closer to Post-

21 Forcella 1911. Unprinted source.

22 For detailed biographies of Ragheb Ayad and Youssef Kamil, see: Abu Ghazi 1982; Abu Ghazi 1984; Radwan 2015.

23 Domenico Morelli (1823–1901) was a politician and painter trained at the Academy of Fine Arts in Naples. While his early style reflects his obedience to realism, the influence of French Impressionism led him to progressively free his style from academic conventions and brought him closer to the *macchiaoli*. He had a significant influence on the painter Antonio Mancini (1852–1930), who was his student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Naples.

impressionism and, in particular, to the Italian *macchiaioli* movement. He was a notorious figure in Cairene cultural life and enjoyed the support of King Fuad I, who acquired several of his works, including a series portraying the stallions of the royal stables. However, in spite of his accomplishment and success in Egypt, when he returned to Rome in 1938, the Italian public failed to appreciate his work, so that he died in sickness and poverty.[24]

While Paolo Forcella and Camillo Innocenti took an active part in administering the School of Fine Arts in Cairo, many other Italian migrants earned a living by giving private lessons in their studios. Their students were essentially young members of the social elite, who were expected to complete their formal education by developing musical or artistic skills. This was the case with two leading painters of the Alexandrian School, Mahmoud Saïd (1897–1964) and Mohamed Naghi (1888–1956). Both were born into aristocratic families and were destined by their fathers to study law.

Mahmoud Saïd, the son of Mohamed Saïd Pasha, an influential politician of Turco-Circassian origin, was educated at the Ecole Française and took lessons in the studio of the Venetian painter, Amelia Da Forno Casonato (1878–1969).[25] She had come to Egypt with her husband, who had been appointed to the Banco di Roma, and specialized in still life, especially flower compositions. She initiated her student to life oil painting and the observation of nature. Thus, Mahmoud Saïd, who would later be considered as one of *the* national painters, started his career by painting flower bouquets. He would pursue his training in the studio of another Italian painter established in Alexandria, the portraitist, Arturo Zanieri (1871–1955), who found a clientele among the members of the royal family, such as Prince Hussein and Prince Omar Toussoun.[26] Throughout his "imposed" career as a judge,[27] Saïd regularly travelled to Italy and allegedly

24 Although information about Camillo Innocenti's activity in Egypt remains scarce, a few monographs have been devoted to him: Fiori 1968; Fagiolo dell'Arco 1977.

25 Amelia da Forno Casonato's nephew, Renzo da Forno (1902–1952), a painter of Cubist influence, joined her in Egypt during the 1930s and enjoyed a certain notoriety. Casonato left Egypt in 1954 and returned to Venice where she continued painting flower still lifes until she died, see Azar 1961: 376.

26 Corgnati 2010: 3.

27 It is more likely that Mahmoud Saïd pursued his career as a judge in parallel with his painting practice under the pressure of his father than by his own will. This is also confirmed by the fact that immediately following the death of his father in 1947, while he was Counsellor at the Appeal Court, Saïd asked for early retirement to devote himself entirely to painting.

Figure 2: Mahmoud Saïd, *Prayer*, oil on plywood, 58 × 79 cm, 1934. Photograph by the author. Courtesy: Museum of Egyptian Modern Art, Cairo.

expressed his profound admiration for the Italian Primitives as well as the influence of the Venetian Renaissance on his paintings (Figure 2).[28]

Similarly, Mohamed Naghi, who was the grandson of Rashid Kamal Pasha, a former governor of the Sudan, would later combine his painting practice with a diplomatic career. Naghi's affinities with Alexandria's Italian community started at an early age during his secondary studies at the Swiss School of Alexandria. There he befriended Giuseppe Ungaretti (1888–1970), who was to become an essayist, poet and a prominent figure of Italian Futurism.

Although Naghi is frequently associated with French Impressionism because of his encounter with Claude Monet in Giverny and his own claim to being a follower of the "master of the water lilies",[29] the influence of Italian art on his work and the close ties he maintained with the Futurists are rarely mentioned. Indeed, before he asserted his association with the impressionist movement, Naghi was trained by yet another Italian painter established in Egypt named Alberto Piatolli. Just after he obtained his diploma in law from the University of

28 "Lettre de Mahmoud Saïd à Beppi-Martin", Dossier Albert Cossery 1986: 107–111.
29 Naghi et al. 1988.

Lyon, Naghi left for Italy in 1910 and enrolled at the *Scuola Libera del Nudo* at the Academy of Florence. During that period, he was initiated to the art of the nude, the Italian landscape, and paintings of Roman ruins, coming up with works such as *The House of Faun in Pompeii* (1912) (Figure 3). After he returned to Egypt, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs appointed him as a diplomat but he continued to paint throughout his career.

Figure 3: Mohamed Naghi, *The House of Faun in Pompeii*, oil on canvas, 1912.
Source: Effat Naghi et al. (1988): *Mohamed Naghi, un impressionniste égyptien*. Cairo: Cahiers de Chabramant, 1988.

Thus Italian artists played a major role in the education of the "pioneers", whether at an institutional level or privately in their studios. While the significant influence of French Impressionism on this generation of painters is clear, it should still be nuanced when studying their training, and closer attention should be paid to the dominating presence of Italian *macchiaioli* as private tutors. For instance, the painter Ottorino Bicchi (1878–1949), who was educated at the Academy in Florence, was a follower of the *macchiaioli* movement. He opened a studio in Alexandria in 1929, where he trained a number of young Egyptians, including the famous brothers Seif and Adham Wanly.

In addition to the aesthetic influence of Italian art teachers, a significant aspect of this connexion was the circulation of the "pioneers" between Egypt and Italy. The students of the School of Fine Arts in Cairo, contrary to painters

coming from privileged backgrounds, such as Mahmoud Saïd or Mohamed Naghi, did not have the means to travel abroad. They nevertheless benefited from scholar grants sponsored by prince Youssef Kamal to complete their artistic studies abroad.

The "Pioneers" in Rome

Once they obtained their diploma from the School of Fine Arts in Cairo, the "pioneers" were sent to Europe on scholar mission with government grants to complete their artistic education. During their stay abroad, the Egyptian Scholar Mission in France supervised the grant-holders by taking care of their needs and by communicating their progress and grades to the Egyptian Ministry of Education. As expected, the French professors in Egypt took advantage of their contacts to send their best pupils to Paris,[30] while the Italians directed them to Rome or Florence. In 1925, Paolo Forcella arranged for three of his most talented students, Ragheb Ayad, Youssef Kamil and Mohamed Hassan to be trained at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome. Ragheb Ayad and Youssef Kamil had already visited Italy by organizing a system of exchange between 1921 and 1922. Because they did not have the financial means to travel, each of them worked in turns as a drawing teacher in secondary schools for a year, to finance the other's stay abroad.[31] This self-sponsored exchange arrangement shows that the journey to Italy was not only a requirement of the educational system, but first and foremost a *passage obligé* in the career of Egyptian artists.

In addition to technical aspects of their artistic training, these missions provided the "pioneers" with the opportunity to see in reality the artworks and monuments which they had studied in class prior to their trip. Indeed, their knowledge of European art, despite the existence of certain private art collections in Cairo,[32] was mostly limited to printed black and white reproductions. The mission to Europe therefore represented the chance to approach the

30 This was the case with the famous sculptor Mahmoud Moukhtar, who was sent to the Academy of Fine Arts in Paris by his professor Guillaume Laplagne, head of the School of Fine Arts in Cairo. For more details about Mahmoud Moukhtar's activity in Paris, see Correa 2014; Radwan 2011.

31 Iskandar/al-Mallakh/al-Sharuni 1991: 108.

32 Although a number of private art collections existed in Cairo, such as that of the politician Mohamed Mahmoud Khalil, it was only at the beginning of the 1930s that museums, such as the Museum of Egyptian Modern Art, were opened to the public.

materiality of artworks that belonged to a heritage to which they related to, prior to their journey.

The stay of this Egyptian trio, consisting of Ayad, Kamil and Hassan, in Rome is emblematic of the experience of numerous grant holders. Their studies abroad had major implications for their careers, as, on their return, many of them were appointed to influential positions in schools, museums or other cultural institutions. The long expedition of the trio to reach the port of Naples by boat from Alexandria represented an adventure in itself. When they finally arrived in Rome, they had to learn Italian before entering the Academy of Fine Arts, where they shared the same studio and were supervised by the Roman painter Umberto Coromaldi (1870–1948).

Another Italian painter who seems to have had a significant influence, particularly on Ragheb Ayad, is Ferruccio Ferrazzi (1891–1978), who was a member of the *Accademia di San Luca* in Rome.[33] Ferrazzi had joined the Futurist movement in his early career before he turned towards a Neoclassical style that brought him closer to the Pre-Raphaelites. Ayad shared an interest in decorative painting with Ferrazzi, who had developed a talent for mural painting by reviving the ancient technique of *encausto*. Although Ayad's activity as a decorator is not very well known, it was an important aspect of his career, as he was commissioned in Egypt to paint several decorative programmes in churches and other public buildings.

The scholar mission also provided the Egyptian students with the opportunity to broaden the scope of their artistic practice and to develop networks within an international environment. Mohamed Hassan depicted the atmosphere of the Academy in 1926, one year after his arrival in Rome, in a satirical work entitled *The Studio*. The caricature represents the diversity of the students and professors, each of them busy with a different artistic activity. Hassan, who is recognizable by his moustache, glasses and corpulent stature, portrayed himself sitting in the centre of *The Studio* holding his palette (Figure 4).

In April 1926, Mohamed Hassan, together with his colleague, Ragheb Ayad, decided to visit the 15th Venice Biennale. They obtained exceptional permission to leave Rome for a couple of weeks, provided they wrote a detailed report of their study trip to the Egyptian Scholar Mission. Ayad took the chance to visit Florence and Siena on the way to Venice and expressed the sense of familiarity he felt when arriving in the *Serenissima*, imagining for one instant that he was "in an Arab city".[34]

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33 The influence of Ferruccio Ferrazzi on Ragheb Ayad's work has been stressed elsewhere: Bardaouil/Fellrath 2008: 11; Corgnati 2010: 3–4.

34 'Ayyad 1926. Manuscript.

Figure 4: Mohamed Hassan, *The Studio*, ink and watercolour on paper, 44 × 58 cm, 1926. Photograph by the author. Courtesy: Museum of Egyptian Modern Art, Cairo.

The 15th Venice Biennale was marked by the participation of the Italian Futurists. The U.S.S.R. had devoted its pavilion to the *Mostra del Futurismo Italiano* curated by the founder of the movement, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876–1944). Among others, the exhibition displayed works by leading figures of Futurism, such as Giacomo Balla, Umberto Boccioni, Lionello Balestrieri and Enrico Pamprolini.[35] In his report, Ragheb Ayad expressed his admiration for the Futurists, whose influence is perceptible in the dynamic lines and vibrant touch characterizing his early works.

By contrast, Mohamed Hassan stated his dislike of the Italian movement, which, according to him, could not be considered as true art but merely as an easy way to escape the serious study and observation of "l'Arte Classica".[36] Hassan's remark brings to the fore the critical approach of the "pioneers"

35 See the 1926 exhibition catalogue: *XVa Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Città di Venezia*.

36 In Italian in brackets in between the original Arabic text. Hasan 1926.

towards the productions of their European contemporaries, an approach made possible by their mission to Europe through the experience of the materiality of the artworks. Subsequently, this visual encounter also led to an introspective reflection on their own production and their position in relation to the trends and avant-gardes of the international art scene. Furthermore, his statement betrays a certain conservatism and his faithful attachment to the classical tradition of the fine arts. Indeed, whether in Cairo or in Rome, the training of the "pioneers" implied the precise observation of "l'Arte Classica", which also involved the act of copying artworks of Western Antiquity and the Renaissance.

Although the process of copying and the role of reproductions of European works in modern Egyptian art history still deserves to be investigated, it appears that the status of copies was and remains ambiguous. It is worth mentioning that a number of copies produced by the "pioneers" were brought back to Egypt at the end of their scholar mission. In other words, these copies were not merely the result of a technical observation exercise, but were images that embodied a visual cultural heritage that moved from Italy to Egypt. In other words, they were as much objects of cultural transfer as proofs of the success of the mission. Moreover, these artworks would hereafter become accessible to a public that was not necessarily familiar with images and canons of representation, such as mythological and religious paintings of the Italian Renaissance.

The example of Mohamed Hassan clearly illustrates the change in status of these copies. During his scholar mission, he made two copies of Renaissance masterpieces located in the Borghese Gallery: Titian's mythological *Sacred and Profane Love* (1514) and the Biblical episode of *Susanna and the Elders* (1655) by the Flemish Caravaggesque painter Gerrit Van Honthorst. Hassan respected the techniques and large dimensions of the originals and after his mission, he brought his canvases back to Cairo. The fact that both copies remain on display in the permanent collection of the Museum of Egyptian Modern Art in Cairo today proves that the ambiguity regarding the status of these copies as well as their cultural significance remains a central question.

Thus the European experience of the "pioneers" represented a crucial step in their respective careers as well as opening a path to the movement of images and visual knowledge transfer. Although they would be engaged, on their return, in the national project of creating an "authentic" Egyptian art, many of them would remain faithful to their European academic training. This was the case with Mohamed Hassan and Youssef Kamil, who painted rural landscapes of the Egyptian countryside in the same manner they used to paint *vedute* of Italian cities. Ragheb Ayad, on the other hand, would develop his own original style in merging the lessons of his Italian experience with ancient Egyptian influences in

his depictions of the peasants' daily lives (Figure 5).[37] All of them however remained connected to Italy throughout their career and would regularly return to their host country.

Figure 5: Ragheb Ayad, *The Field*, ink and watercolour on paper, 1954. Photograph by Mai Hussein Badr. Courtesy: Museum of Egyptian Modern Art, Cairo.

The arts of politics: The Egyptian academy in Rome, Ethiopia and the Venice Biennale

The experience of the "pioneers" abroad gave an impulse to the implementation of state-funded cultural projects. When the grant-holders returned to Egypt, the administration of the School of Fine Arts in Cairo had been transferred to the Ministry of Education, which increasingly aimed at replacing former European employees with Egyptians ones. When Ragheb Ayad returned to Cairo after having spent four years in Italy, he suggested creating an Egyptian Academy in Rome. The sight of all the other foreign academies established in the Italian

37 On Pharaonism and the influence of ancient Egypt on the works of the "pioneers", see Naef 2015; Radwan 2013b.

capital had led him to imagine a similar institution for his country, which would function as an artist residency and facilitate cultural exchange.

This proposal came at the right time for King Fuad I, who was inclined to maintain diplomatic relationships with Italy at the dawn of the Second World War. The initial negotiation between the two governments led to the allocation of a piece of land in the Valle Giulia in exchange for an archaeological excavation site in Egypt for the Italian Institute.[38] After the agreement was concluded in 1936, Fuad I appointed the artist and diplomat Sahab Rifaat Almaz as the director of the Academy. The first years of the institution coincided with the accession to the throne of Fuad's son, King Farouk I and the official independence of Egypt. Farouk I was keen on preserving the diplomatic ties with Italy initiated by his father in order to maintain stability in the region, particularly with regard to the strategic implications of Mussolini's occupation of Ethiopia for the domination of the Nile.

Besides acting as the head of the Academy, Almaz was a key figure in foreign cultural affairs. He negotiated the first participation of Egypt in the 21st Venice Biennale in 1938 and was responsible for curating the exhibition. That year, Egypt was the only state from the African continent and, in fact, the only non-Western country, to be represented at the Biennale. Consequently, the "exoticism" and "newness" of the Egyptian participation attracted the attention of the public.

A journalist and critic of the Biennale, Elio Zorzi, expressed his amazement at discovering for the first time that a country like Egypt was producing a "national art that was deeply rooted in the ancestral artistic sentiment of its ancient people".[39] Overall, the works on display focused on national-oriented subjects, such as the rural world, traditional customs and popular tales. The participants included Mahmoud Saïd and Ragheb Ayad, who had visited the Biennale more than a decade before when they were students at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome. Zorzi also stressed Mohamed Naghi's talented work, and it seems more likely to be a pretext for emphasizing that the artist had resided in Ethiopia "at the beginning of the Italian conquest" than to praise his series of impressionist landscapes.[40] The Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had indeed sent the artist and diplomat Mohamed Naghi to Addis Ababa in 1932, at a time when tensions were increasing between the Ethiopian monarchy and the Italian

38 In 1929, the Egyptian Academy in Rome was temporarily housed in the Villa Borghese before it was relocated the following year to the Parc de Colle Oppio. In 1965, the institution was transferred to its present location on Via Omero.

39 Zorzi 1938: 220.

40 Zorzi 1938: 221.

government regarding the presence of its military troops in the country. This was the beginning of the artists' so-called "Abyssinian period", a prolific production characterized by vivid light and warm colours inspired by Ethiopian landscapes. It appears that during that time Naghi was more focused on his artistic production than on conducting diplomatic affairs. He painted works representing scenes of Ethiopian daily and court life, including several portraits of the Negus Haile Selassie (Figure 6).[41]

Figure 6: Mohamed Naghi, *Palm Sunday in Abyssinia*, oil on canvas, 79 × 151 cm, 1932. Photograph by the author. Courtesy: Museum of Egyptian Modern Art, Cairo.

As a diplomat, Naghi did not clearly express any political opinions regarding Mussolini's fascist regime and the occupation of Ethiopia. This does not imply that he supported authoritarian regimes as he, for instance, clearly stated his views on the disastrous consequences of Nazi ideology on human values and artistic freedom. In a virulent article that he published at the beginning of the Second World War entitled *Art et Dictature*,[42] Naghi openly attacked the totalitarian regime of the Third Reich and the Führer's subjugation of individual

41 Mohamed Naghi's "Abyssinian" series was exhibited in 1936 at the Beaux-Arts Gallery in London. *The Times*. 2 March: 15.

42 Naghi 1940: 163–167.

liberty and universal ideals.[43] With such beliefs, he reflected the political views of a younger generation of intellectuals and artists who belonged to the Egyptian Surrealist movement founded in 1939 by the writer Georges Henein (1914–1973). The Egyptian Surrealists, known as the *Art and Liberty* group, adhered to the ideas of their French namesakes, led by André Breton, regarding resistance to fascist ideology. Nonetheless, Mohamed Naghi affirmed his admiration for the Italian Futurists. As a fervent nationalist, he firmly believed in the social and political virtues of a national art that could serve and reflect the progress of a nation.[44] It is thus possibly on that last point that he found affinity with the ideals of the Italian movement. As mentioned earlier, Naghi had maintained a close friendship ever since his childhood with the Futurist Giuseppe Ungaretti and it appears that he also had great respect for Marinetti, the author of the *Manifesto del Futurismo*, who just like him and Ungaretti, was born and raised in Alexandria.

Naghi paid tribute to Marinetti in one of his major works entitled *The School of Alexandria*, which he had begun to paint one year after the Venice Biennale in 1939 (Figure 7). This large allegoric painting was one of the most ambitious works of his career, as he had worked on it for more than ten years, taking it with him on his diplomatic travels, including his journey to Italy where he was the attaché to the Royal Legation in Rome. He finally completed it in 1952 towards the end of his life in his studio located close to the Pyramids of Giza.

Figure 7: Mohamed Naghi, *The School of Alexandria*, 700 × 300 cm, oil on canvas, 1952. Source: Effat Naghi et al. (1988): *Mohamed Naghi, un impressionniste égyptien*. Cairo: Cahiers de Chabramant.

43 Naghi 1940: 164.
44 Naghi 1929: 69–70.

The title and subject of the work evidently echoes the famous fresco of *The School of Athens* painted by Raphael at the beginning of the sixteenth century.[45] Like the master of the *cinquecento* who depicted the triumph of Reason and Faith by synthesizing the philosophical and theological thought of Ancient Greece, Mohamed Naghi had the ambition of transposing this idea to the other side of the Mediterranean. Naghi's *School of Alexandria* included numerous figures of ancient and contemporary thinkers, such as Taha Hussein, Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid and the feminist Huda Shaarawi. Among the crowd of intellectuals just behind the figure of the mathematician Archimedes, he portrayed Marinetti and Ungaretti as part of the philosophical legacy of the city founded by Alexander the Great, whose equestrian portrait figures in the centre of Naghi's composition.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Naghi was appointed head of the Egyptian Academy in Rome in 1947 while still working at the Egyptian Legation in the capital. A few years later, under Gamal Abdel Nasser, the institution came to be directed in 1952 and 1956 respectively by two of the members of the Roman trio, Mohamed Hassan and Youssef Kamil, who had both come a long way since their scholar mission to Rome and were by that time influential figures of the Egyptian cultural sphere.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the examination of migratory flows and transnational circulations of persons and images between Egypt and Italy brings to the fore the importance of these connexions in the formation of early modern Egyptian art. The visual dialogue through art education or travelling artworks indeed challenged existing geopolitical borders, while simultaneously generating networks of exchange. The cartography of these multi-layered flows, however, remains fragmentary and calls for further research in order to broaden the scope of knowledge of these phenomena to better understand the circumstances of the formation of artistic modernity in the region. To this end, an important task remains in mapping networks of cross-cultural exchange by identifying key actors, intermediaries and processes of knowledge transfer.

Italian artists played a major part in defining certain criteria of art education and knowledge transfer, whether in Cairo or in Rome. Many aspects of these interactions still deserve closer attention, such as the influence of Futurism on the "pioneers", not simply as an aesthetic but also as a social and political idea.

45 *The School of Athens* by Raphael was painted between 1509 and 1511 on commission of Pope Julian II to decorate the *Camera della Segnatura* in the Vatican.

On the other hand, the circulation of artists and artworks through scholar missions had a major impact on the artistic practice of the "pioneers", as well as on their positioning on the international art scene. However, one has to underline that the significance of scholar missions goes far beyond the geographical and historical limits of this study and set its mark on modern visual arts in the Middle East throughout the twentieth century.

In addition, a central aspect appears to be the diplomatic responsibilities of Egyptian artists in cultural affairs, whether they were officially appointed, as in the case of Mohamed Naghi or Sahab Rifaat Almaz or self-appointed, like Ragheb Ayad. When the latter took the initiative of creating the Egyptian Academy in Rome, he proved that the grant-holders were key intermediaries in developing international networks and in implementing cultural policies.

Thus whereas these transcultural interactions implied the translation and transposition of artistic canons and criteria, as seen in the example of the reproductions of European artworks, they also led to creativity in the merging of disparate visual cultures. Therefore, while the investigation of "contact zones" as spaces where disparate cultures meet and interact may bring to the fore power relationships, it also reveals the creative and connective aspects of these cultural exchanges in the field of visual arts.

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Note: Note on the transliteration: For the sake of clarity, the names of the artists have been transcribed according to their usual signatures in Latin script, i. e. Mahmoud Saïd, Ragheb Ayad, etc. Other proper nouns have been written following their accepted common usage, i. e. King Farouk I or Taha Hussein. Only Arabic nouns, expressions and references have been transliterated using a simplified version without diacritic signs.